BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE (NORTHWEST EDITION)

Date: Sunday, November 04, 2007
Location: BOSTON, MA
Circulation (DMA): 672,882 (7)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: 1,11
Keyword: New Hampshire

Film captures voice of a river

Nashua activist's battle is recalled

By John Dyer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The Nashua River appeared red, yellow, and orange recently because of the fall foliage reflected in its waters — not the dyes and other chemicals that once tainted its 56-mile course from New Hampshire to the northern suburbs of Boston.

That change tells the story of Marion Stoddart's life. Now, local filmmakers are recounting her tale, too.

"It was really difficult for me to do this," Stoddart, considered by many the matriarch of environmentalism in Massachusetts, said in a recent interview. Lobbying politicians, establishing the Nashua River Watershed Association, and raising awareness about industrial pollution in the 1960s was easy. Talking about herself for interviews on camera? That was hard for the modest 79-year-old.

"The only way I could do it, well, was to feel it was going to help the river," she said.

STODDART, Page 11

Stoddart is the subject of "The Work of 1000," an independent film project by Pepperell-based ExtraMile.com Productions. Producer Susan Edwards hopes the documentary about one woman will inspire, as its name suggests, thousands of others to replicate the activism that turned the Nashua from the polluted, open-air sewer that it was for much of the 20th century to the picturesque river of today.

The film is about both Stoddart and the era she symbolizes. A Nevada native who moved to Groton with her physicist husband in 1962, Stoddart was an activist who helped the environmental movement achieve its great triumphs of the 1970s: establishment of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and passage of the Clean Water Act. Her advocacy was unapologetically local. She was a housewife who focused on the dirty river that ran through her hometown.

"Marion's story in itself is a compelling story," Edwards said. "You can be an ordinary person and do extraordinary things. That's a really, really important point right now. Then there is this change of attitude that took place in the '60s. People had to decide it was no longer acceptable to dump into our rivers."

For almost 100 years, paper companies and other manufacturers from Fitchburg to Nashua poured their byproducts — wood fibers and toxins used to color and treat paper — into the waterway, said Neal Anderson, a retired professor of biology at Fitchburg State College who appears in the film. The microorganisms that fed and flourished on that waste used up the river's oxygen, killing fish and most other life for years.

"Because the river was a different color every day, you knew — it was really obvious — that something was happening upstream," Anderson said.

Unfulfilled by her duties as a wife and mother of three children, Stoddart took on the challenge of cleaning up the Nashua. Her activism included writing letters and giving jars of disgusting river water to politicians. Her efforts culminated in 1966, when the state passed legislation that funded the construction of eight wastewater treatment plants that currently clean the Nashua.

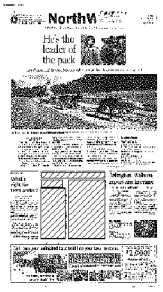
In 1987, Stoddart was accepted into the United Nations Environmental Program's Global 500 Forum, the organization's list of the world's top environmental activists. Inductees include the likes of Sir Edmund Hillary, who made the first successful ascent of Mount Everest and has been instrumental in the preservation of forests in the Himalayas.

"The Work of 1000" is a documentary that, in the style of Ken Burns, features film clips and photographs of Stoddart and the Nashua from different periods, voiceovers from almost 20 hours of interviews, and occasional animation. The film harkens to an early chapter of the environmental movement, with the goal of raising interest in contemporary ecological concerns like global warming and energy consumption.

"It makes people think about the water they drink and where it comes from," said Sherry Moore, the film's director of photography, whose work has appeared on the respected PBS program "Independent Lens." "People who sit in traffic and slug down bottled spring water might think about the fact that it was trucked from Miami or Italy."

Today, a trailer of the film is scheduled to be screened in the MacNeil Lounge at Lawrence Academy in Groton. The trailer is part of a fund-raising campaign to cover production costs that could reach as much as $200,000, Edwards said. She expects the full film to be released in spring 2009 with the help of the nonprofit Center for Independent Documentary in Sharon.

Target audiences for the film include people who live along the Nashua River, as well as documentary buffs and independent film festival audiences nationwide, Edwards said. She also believes that allowing viewers to download the finished film from ExtraMile.com's website will allow it to reach people around the world. "The Web is really good at channeling informa-



BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE (NORTHWEST EDITION)

Date: Sunday, November 04, 2007
Location: BOSTON, MA
Circulation (DMA): 672,882 (7)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: 1,11
Keyword: New Hampshire

Burrelles Luce

tion to niche communities," she said.

The film might also raise awareness about ecological challenges the river now faces. In the process of cleaning wastewater, the Nashua's treatment plants add nutrients like phosphorous to the river, causing algae blooms, said Rick Dunn, a watershed specialist at the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

The state is revamping its plants to cut down on those nutrients. Bacteria from lawn fertilizers and other materials that wash into the river are also a problem, he said.

The river has problems, but none are like the ones it faced before Stoddart came along, Dunn said.

"I still remember the big blobs of paper waste floating in the river," he said. "She was right on the money. It's . . . her efforts, in part because of the Nashua Watershed Association, that prompted action on the river."

In the early 1980s, after the Nashua had largely bounced back, Stoddart started a company that organized trips for groups of women over 40. She will be traveling to Indochina before the end of the year.

She often spends her days now with her family, canoeing and working at the watershed association.

Stoddart has her regrets. They don't stem from any failures, however. Rather, they reflect her disappointment at not being able to do more.

She said her activism, extraordinary for a mother in the 1960s and '70s, took its toll on her family. She feels guilty about attending night meetings on the river cleanup, for example, when she could have been at home reading her children bedtime stories.

That lament might be shared by many women today working long hours. But Stoddart emphasizes that, back then, she had a choice, because most housewives at the time stayed at home.

"I still feel badly about that," she said. "But I was able to justify it. The work I was doing would make it possible for *all* the children to enjoy the river."

MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF

A new documentary profiles Marion Stoddart.

MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF

Filmmakers Sherry Moore (left) and Susan Edwards flank Marion Stoddart, the subject of their documentary.